

## VARIETIES OF POSTWAR REALISM: PROSE AND POETRY

So much of the literature of the postwar era aspired to being realistic that we often use the phrase “the rise of realism” to characterize postbellum literature. But what was “realism”? In historical terms, it was a movement in literature and the visual arts that succeeded Romanticism and emerged at somewhat different times in England, Western Europe, Russia, and the United States. While realist fiction in French and Russian was read in English translation, realism differed from country to country. In the United States, the concept promoted by cultural arbiter William Dean Howells carried a great deal of weight—although, as we’ll see, it should not be taken as the final word. For Howells, realism was “nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material” (*Criticism and Fiction*, 1891). In reviews, editorial columns, and his book *Criticism and Fiction*, Howells explained what that entailed, taking pains to distinguish realism from Romanticism. Realist writing, he maintained, portrayed real people—individuals, including very ordinary people, not the stock types that romantic fiction featured (the strongly disapproved of the novels of Sir Walter Scott, for instance). Realist plots were plausible, not fantastic, and they turned not only on romantic love but on the broad range of human concerns. Dialogue was not stylized but vernacular, reflecting the great variety that comprised American English. Howells also asserted that realism strove for objectivity. Realist literature did not explain or moralize or seek to manipulate readers’ emotions or beliefs; he insisted, it sought to present people and social life as they really were, giving the responsibility of making moral judgments to readers. In structural terms, this meant that narrators should be reticent; unlike the narrator of, say, Stowe’s (sentimental) *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, they should not comment or otherwise intrude.

Howells’ criteria were grounded in what he saw as the governing principle of realism: its truth to “the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women” (*Criticism and Fiction*). That principle was at once aesthetic, ethical, and political, for Howells, realism was democratic—about commonplace people and conveying our common humanity. Until he became discouraged by economic inequity and other undemocratic aspects of U.S. life, Howells also held that realism was therefore uniquely American.

Howells not only wrote prolifically about realism; as the era’s most influential editor and critic, he had a strong hand in its success. He championed the writing of Henry James and Mark Twain (both good friends), Hamlin Garland, Charles W. Chesnut, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett—all included in this volume—and many others. However, his efforts alone could not have made realism the predominant trend in postwar American literature that it was. The phenomenal changes that took place in the decades after national unification were vital to its success. The introduction to this section of the

anthology goes into detail about these changes, so mention of a few of the salient ones will suffice here. Geographically, the country was both expanding and changing. Increasingly, Americans were living in cities, and cities were increasing in both size and number. The population too was growing and changing. Heavy industry and mass production were firmly established. Class stratification, and differences and tensions between classes, were becoming more entrenched. Discrete regions and local cultures, along with the diversity of Americans’ speech, were coming into sharp focus while a somewhat uniform national culture was also solidifying. All of this, and more, fed Americans’ interest in reading about who they were, how they themselves (now) lived, and the lives of other Americans.

While writers, critics, and many readers recognized that these conditions favored realism, other circumstances, less apparent at the time, also contributed to realism’s ascendancy. One of the most important was the consolidation of publishing into an industry. Centralized and streamlined, with large houses in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago dominating the field (examples include Harpers in New York, Houghton Mifflin in Boston, Lippincott in Philadelphia, Herbert Stone in Chicago), publishers simplified the production process, promoted their products through innovative advertising, and used sophisticated distribution and sales networks. They also more or less determined what would appear in print. Realism *sold*: it met the interests of an increasingly literate public with greater leisure and somewhat more discretionary income than most Americans had had before the Civil War. It also helped finally establish authorship as a remunerative profession. All of this functioned synergistically with the renewed American literary nationalism of the postwar era—the call for “the great American novel” was first made by John William De Forest in *The Nation* magazine in 1868—and Americans’ interest in American life to create an ideal environment for the flourishing of realism.

Other factors contributed as well. One was the take-off of photography. Not only were Americans flooded with visual images; photography seemed to promise that objective presentation was possible, whether it was of individuals and groups (which anyone with a Kodak could produce), of major events (as in photographs of Lincoln’s funeral procession), or of aspects of contemporary life from which many Americans were normally shielded, such as the photographs of Jacob Reiss’s muckraking exposé of poverty, *How The Other Half Lives*. (See the photographs reproduced at the beginning of this volume.) Enhancing the seeming possibility of objectivity were both the premises and practices of the new field of sociology, which sought to characterize society using empirical approaches, and new journalistic practices. The latter included on-the-scene reporting (the practice of newspapers publishing reports by their army correspondents began during the Civil War; Louisa May Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches* of 1863 was based on letters in which she had described her experiences as a nurse in the Union Hospital in Washington, DC) and investigative journalism, of which Ida B. Wells’ *The Red Record* and Ambrose Bierce’s articles exposing California railroads’ involvement in political and economic corruption are exemplary. All of this affirmed realist fiction’s confidence in its ability to capture the truth. More specifically, Alcott’s short story “My Contraband” draws partly on her nursing experiences, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* is novelistic investigative

journalism, and Stephen Crane may well have been familiar with Civil War journalism when he wrote his celebrated novel *The Red Badge of Courage*.

In light of this ferment and of Howells's emphasis on the democratic character of realism, one might suppose that "realism" accommodated virtually any writing committed to "telling the truth." It did not. General definitions were necessary to characterize realist writing, as they are for any class of literature. To be sure these were capacious: Alcott's Civil War fiction and her literature for children, Constance Fenimore Woolson's short stories, and some of Harriet Prescott Spofford's rather gothic fiction more or less qualified. However, Howells sought to establish a *cordon sanitaire* that set realism apart from the sensational, sometimes racy fiction that was also popular, as well as from Romantic fiction. Much harsher were Henry James's efforts to elevate realist authors to the status of artists, for they included ruling out openly emotional writing, sentimental writing in particular. One of James's prime targets was the fiction of women novelists, which had been extremely popular since midcentury. His review of Rebecca Harding Davis's *Waiting for the Verdict* exemplifies his disdain for this writing—a disdain so intense that Stowe biographer Joan Hedrick concludes that James was determined to make authorship a masculine profession.

In actuality, realism far exceeded such efforts to delimit it. For neither Howells nor James was the character of "reality" established once and for all. As Jennifer Emory-Peck shows in her introduction to the James selections, realism as he practiced it shifted markedly over time, and his increasingly intricate prose and turns of consciousness. Realist fiction took paths in other directions as well. Although Charles W. Chesnut's stories of southern life and of life on the color line in the North found favor with Howells (and were published by Houghton Mifflin), as Chesnut's work became more directly engaged with racial apartheid and white violence, it became unpalatable to white readers: eventually he was unable to publish.

Moreover, realism was by no means a postbellum phenomenon. Howells himself knew this, but he tended to extend the term to highly esteemed antebellum writers like Hawthorne. In fact, the sentimental literature that James so disdained pioneered realist fiction in the United States. Harding Davis herself published the ground-breaking novella about the lives of Welsh miners in West Virginia, *Life in the Iron Mills* in 1861, while the authors of women's domestic fiction focused on the emotional texture, the relationships, the practices and the economics, the struggles, and the rewards that constituted middle-class white women's lives. (Susan Warner's best-selling novel of 1850, *The Wide, Wide World*, remained popular throughout the nineteenth century.) Slave narratives, too, were pointedly realistic: Douglass's *Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845), William Wells Brown's *Narrative of William Wells Brown, now a fugitive Slave* (1845), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and many others laid out the realities of slavery—the cruelties, violence, and other horrendous circumstances that comprised the ordinary lives of slaves as well as the strategies for survival practiced by many enslaved people. So compelling were these narratives that Augusta Rohrbach posits that their success spurred the emergence of realist fiction. In addition, the claims to fact and truth of *Uncle*

*Tom's Cabin* (1850-1851) were so important to its effect that Stowe produced *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1854, the subtitle of which reads *Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story Is Founded, Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*.

What is more, even though Howells, James, and many publishers and readers identified realist writing almost exclusively with the novel and short story, it took other prose forms. Biographies of the great and the more ordinary, memoirs and other autobiographical writing, journalistic pieces on well-known writers—all appealed to a readership eager to know about other people's lives. (A total of 350,000 copies of Ulysses S. Grant's two-volume *Memoirs* [1885-1886] was purchased shortly after its publication.)

Just as significantly, realism was not limited to prose, for poetry had long had a realist strain. James Russell Lowell's *Biglow Papers* (1848) features Hosea Biglow's Yankee vernacular and Yankee outlook. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, the first edition of which appeared in 1855, pioneered a different kind of poetic realism, one that presents Americans of all kinds in straightforward language and gives voice to the bodily, sexual, emotional, and spiritual life of "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" and other Americans. In words that anticipate Howells (who was at best ambivalent about him), Whitman proclaims in his Preface that "I tell what I tell for precisely what it is. . . . You [the reader] shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me."

Whitman continued to develop his poetic realism alongside other modes in the many versions of *Leaves of Grass* he created (the last appeared in 1891-1892), and his poetry was enormously popular. Realism in poetry took other directions as well. Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt's poetry is realistic in its expression of "a full range of emotions and perspectives" in all its contradiction (Paula Bennett, author of this description and editor of the Piatt section, suggests that stylistically, Piatt's poetry anticipates modernism, an observation that points to how slippery many of the distinctions posited by critics and literary historians are). Dialect poetry, which was fantastically popular towards the end of the century, dovetailed with prose realism, as Howells recognized—he called Lowell "almost the greatest and finest realist who ever wrought in verse" and promoted the dialect poetry of James Whitcomb Riley and Paul Laurence Dunbar. However, Howells did not take note of Dunbar's non-dialect poetry, which includes the powerful reflection on the suffering that lay behind African Americans' masks of smiles, "We Wear the Mask," and it is doubtful that he would have been aware of the dialect poetry of Francis E. W. Harper (see the Harper section of Volume I).

The literature in this section goes some distance towards showcasing the range of postwar realism. Realist writing, however, in all its variety, is to be found throughout this volume, whether it characterizes a work in full or is one strain among several coexisting ones. It also informs its offspring, naturalist writing, selections of which are in the section "On the Cusp of a New Century." Moreover, owing to its malleability and an enduring interest in—the absence of consensus about—reality, realism thrives in a variety of forms and styles throughout the twentieth century. It continues to do so.

the yard, and brimming milk-pails at the door! what pleasant voices! what laughter! what security! and here—  
 Now, as she sang on in the slow, endless, infinite moments, the fervent vision of God's peace was gone. Just as the grave had lost its sting, she was snatched back again to the arms of earthly hope. In vain she tried to sing, "There remaineth a rest for the people of God,"—her eyes trembled on her husband's, and she could only think of him, and of the child, and of happiness that yet might be, but with what a dreadful gulf of doubt between! She shuddered now in the suspense; all calm forsook her; she was tortured with dissolving heats or frozen with icy blasts; her face contracted, growing small and pinched; her voice was hoarse and sharp,—every tone cut like a knife,—the notes became heavy to lift,—withheld by some hostile pressure,—impossible. One gasp, a convulsive effort, and there was silence,—she had lost her voice.

The beast made a sluggish movement,—stretched and fawned like one awaking,—then, as if he would have yet more of the enchantment, stirred her slightly with his muzzle. As he did so, a sidelong hint of the man striding below with the raised gun smote him; he sprang round furiously, and, seizing his prey, was about to leap into some unknown airy den of the top-most branches now waving to the slow dawn. The late moon had rounded through the sky so that her gleam at last fell full upon the bough with fairy frosting: the wintry morning light did not yet penetrate the gloom. The woman, suspended in mid-air an instant, cast only one agonized glance beneath,—but across and through it, ere the lids could fall, shot a withering sheet of flame—a rifle-crack, half-heard, was lost in the terrible yell of desperation that bounded after it and filled her ears with savage echoes, and in the wide arc of some eternal descent she was falling;—but the beast fell under her.

I think that the moment following must have been too sacred for us, and perhaps the three have no special interest again till they issue from the shadows of the wilderness upon the white hills that skirt their home. The father carries the child hushed again into slumber, the mother follows with no such feeble step as might be anticipated. It is not time for reaction,—the tension not yet relaxed, the nerves still vibrant, she seems to herself like some one newly made; the night was a dream; the present stamped upon her in deep satisfaction, neither weighed nor compared with the past; if she has the careful tricks of former habit, it is as an automaton; and as they slowly climb the steep under the clear gray vault and the paling morning tuff of dead grasses for the chimney-piece of the log-house, or a handful of brown cones for the child's play,—of these quiet, happy folk you would scarcely dream how lately they had stolen from under the banner and in advance; the wife lingers over a singular footprint in the snow, stoops and examines it, then looks up with a hurried word. Her husband stands alone on the hill, his arms folded across the babe, his gun fallen,—stands

defined as a silhouette against the pallid sky. What is there in their home, lying below and yellowing in the light, to fix him with such a stare? She springs to his side. There is no home there. The log-house, the barns, the neighboring farms, the fences, are all blotted out and mingled in one smoking ruin. Desolation and death were indeed there, and beneficence and life in the forest. Tomahawk and scalping-knife, descending during that night, had left behind them only this work of their accomplished hatred and one subtle foot-print in the snow.

For the rest,—the world was all before them, where to choose.<sup>2</sup>

1860

## ■ SAMUEL LANGHORNE CLEMENS (MARK TWAIN) ■ 1835-1910

Mark Twain—the historical Samuel Langhorne Clemens—is variously known as a writer of humor, regionalist and historical fiction, travel narratives, and tales, sketches, allegories, and political commentary. His moods range from thumbing his nose at the establishment through lyrical evocations of America's past to angry condemnations of the "damned human race." And his works play the temporal keyboard from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century to a timeless, nightmare world. Although many of his readers think they know Mark Twain, he is notoriously hard to pin down.

Samuel Clemens was born in rural America—Florida, Missouri—in 1835 and died in the exurbs of New York City—Redding, Connecticut—in 1910. Between his youth and his death, he had visited most parts of the globe and met many of the world's most prominent men and women. Reared in the dialect tradition of American writing, he became its master practitioner. Language—what it is, how it is used, and what it can tell us about the people speaking it—was the central literary preoccupation of his life. He was also fascinated by technologies, such as the telegraph, that suggested the human capability to conquer time and space. As he moved through his century, he responded both to contemporary events as they unfolded and to the specter of his contemporaries' grappling with choice, morality, and law. By the time he died, he no longer believed that human beings were capable of moral action.

Twain's writings reflect both his moods and his movements. Novels such as *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) reflect the landscapes and characters of his antebellum childhood, which was primarily passed in the Mississippi riverboat town of Hannibal, Missouri. In these, his

<sup>2</sup>Concluding lines of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) describing Adam and Eve's departure from the Garden of Eden.

best-known works, he rides his contemporaries' interest in books about young boys' adventures. Unlike most writers in this genre, however, Twain was less interested in teaching young readers how to conform to social norms than in presenting realistic images of adolescents who are facing serious moral issues, such as, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, whether to turn in an escaped slave. As a result, this novel in particular has been read very differently by subsequent generations. For instance, for young readers because he smoked, sequent generations presented a bad example for young readers because he smoked, protagonist presented a bad example for young readers because he smoked, side watermelons, and spoke in dialect, late twentieth-century readers agonized about its racial politics, with some readers praising its depiction of the relationship between a white boy and a black man and others finding it racist.

In a very different vein, tales such as "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865), and travel narratives such as *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *Roughing It* (1872), reflect Twain's experiences just before and during the Civil War years, when he left Hannibal, first to become a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River and, later, to head west to the Nevada and California territories, where he became a journalist and started learning his craft. *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), his first long publication, shows him moving in the opposite direction geographically, as a "tourist" visiting Europe and the Holy Land. *The Gilded Age* (1873), his first novel, coauthored with the writer Charles Dudley Warner, took on—and named—the era of excess through which the United States passed just after the Civil War. Both early works demonstrate Twain's capacity for biting satire—directed against both arrogant Europeans and pretentious Americans.

After he had established his reputation as a satirist, regionalist, and writer of travel narratives, and after he had traveled extensively in Europe, Twain turned to European history and geography. The novels *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1895), and the travel narrative *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), show him moving into other times and places as he sought to use Old World materials to comment on contemporary life. In his last two decades, sketches such as "My Platonic Sweetheart" (1898) and novels such as *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), as well as parts of his *Autobiography* (1906–1907), show him revisiting scenes of his childhood as he pondered questions of racial identity and the possibility that dream life might be as "real" as waking life. Following the *Equator* (1897), his last travel narrative, exhibits his response to non-European peoples and their cultures. In the early twentieth century, political commentaries such as "The Czar's Soliloquy" (1905), "King Leopold's Soliloquy" (1905), and "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" (1901) denounce his direct, and angry, response to contemporary events, especially Europeans' and Americans' imperialist interventions into other countries.

Because Mark Twain wrote in so many genres, on so many topics, reading compelling and for whom. For instance, in addition to the racial debates about *Huck Finn*, readers of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, which transposes a nineteenth-century workman into sixth-century England, have long noted that the novel can be read either as a comic time-travel story or as a serious (and contradictory) polemic on American politics and on humans' capacity for moral action. Twain's outspoken sympathy for Chinese immigrants, and his

protests against their treatment, is offset by his contemptuous attitudes toward Native Americans. And his extraordinary dexterity with language—words, phrases, syntax, and punctuation—can result not only in some of the most lyrical passages in the American language, but also in some of the most scurrilous. Mark Twain is alternately explosive, lyrical, satirical, and tendentious, but he is always compelling. His love of language, and his engagement with issues that transcend his generation, make him central to the American tradition that calls readers to question their own assumptions.

Susan K. Harris  
University of Kansas

### Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog<sup>1</sup>

Mr. A. Ward.

Dear Sir:—Well, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and I inquired after your friend Leonidas W. Smiley, as you requested me to do, and I here-unto append the result. If you can get any information out of it you are cordially welcome to it. I have a lurking suspicion that your Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth—that you never knew such a personage, and that you only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him it would remind him of his infamous *Jim Smiley*, and he would go to work and bore me nearly to death with some infernal reminiscence of him as long and tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was your design, Mr. Ward, it will gratify you to know that it succeeded.

I found Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the barroom stove of the little old dilapidated tavern in the ancient mining camp of Boomerang, and I noticed that he was fat and bald-headed, and had an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance. He roused up and gave me good-day. I told him a friend of mine had commissioned me to make some inquiries about a cherished companion of his boyhood named Leonidas W. Smiley—Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley—a young minister of the gospel, who he had heard was at one time a resident of this village of Boomerang. I added that if Mr. Wheeler could tell me anything about this Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, I would feel under many obligations to him.

<sup>1</sup>In 1865, while living in California, Mark Twain sent "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" to the comic writer Artemus Ward, who had asked for a sketch for a book he was putting together. But because it arrived too late, it was published elsewhere, in the *New York Saturday Press*, on November 18, 1865. Told by two narrators, Mark Twain and Simon Wheeler, the ironic sketch allows readers to feel supe-

rior to Wheeler, but ultimately they find that they have been taken in. The story of the jumping frog made Mark Twain famous because it was copied repeatedly by other publications. Later the author revised the sketch substantially and gave it a new name, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," when he included it in his *Sketches, New and Old* (1875). [Notes by Everett Emerson.]

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair—and then sat down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the quiet, gently-flowing key to which he turned the initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm—but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in finesse. To me, the spectacle of a man drifting serenely along through such a queer yarn without ever smiling was exquisitely absurd. As I said before, I asked him to tell me what he knew of Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, and he replied as follows. I let him go on in his own way, and never interrupted him once:

There was a feller here once by the name of Jim Smiley, in the winter of '49—or maybe it was the spring of '50—I don't recollect exactly, some how, though what makes me think it was one or the other is because I remember the big flume wasn't finished when he first come to the camp, but anyway, he was the curiosest man about always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side, and if he couldn't he'd change sides—any way that suited the other man would suit him—any way just so's he got a bet, he was satisfied. But still, he was lucky—uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner. He was always ready and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solitary thing mentioned but what that feller'd offer to bet on it—and take any side you please, as I was just telling you: if there was a horse race, you'd find him flush or you find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dog-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a cat-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken-fight, he'd bet on it; why if there was two birds setting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first—or if there was a camp-meeting he would be there reglar to bet on parson Walker, which he judged to be the best exhorter about here, and so he was, too, and a good man; if he even see a straddle-bug start to go any wheres, he would bet you how long it would take him to get wherever he was going to, and if you took him up he would foller that straddle-bug to Mexico but what he would find out where he was bound for and how long he was on the road. Lots of the boys here has seen that Smiley and can tell you about him. Why, it never made no difference to him—he would bet on anything—the dangdest feller. Parson Walker's wife laid very sick, once, for a good while, and it seemed as if they warn't going to save her; but one morning he come in and Smiley asked him how she was, and he said she was considerable better—thank the Lord for his infinit mercy—yet—and Smiley, before he thought, says, "Well, I'll resk two-and-a-half that she don't, anyway."

Thish-yer Smiley had a mare—the boys called her the fifteen-minute nag, but that was only in fun, you know, because, of course, she was faster than that—and he used to win money on that horse, for all she was so slow and always had the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption, or something of that kind. They used to give her two or three hundred yards' start, and then pass her under way; but always at the fag-end of the race she'd get excited and desperate-like, and come cavorting and spraddling up, and scattering her legs around limber, sometimes in the air, and sometimes out to one side amongst the fences, and kicking up m-o-r-e dust, and raising m-o-r-e racket with her coughing and sneezing and blowing her nose—and always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead, as near as you could cipher it down.

And he had a little small bull-pup, that to look at him you'd think he warn't worth a cent, but to set around and look ornery, and lay for a chance to steal something. But as soon as money was up on him he was a different dog—his under-jaw'd begin to stick out like the for'castle of a steamboat, and his teeth would uncover, and shine savage like the furnaces. And a dog might tackle him, and bully-rag him, and bite him, and throw him over his shoulder two or three times, and Andrew Jackson—which was the name of the pup—Andrew Jackson would never let on but what he was satisfied, and hadn't expected nothing else—and the bets being doubled and doubled on the other side all the time, till the money was all up—and then all of a sudden he would grab that other dog just by the joint of his hind legs and freeze to it—not chew, you understand, but only just grip and hang on till they throwed up the sponge, if it was a year. Smiley always came out winner on that pup till he harnessed a dog once that didn't have no hind legs, because they'd been sawed off in a circular saw, and when the thing had gone along far enough, and the money was all up, and he came to make a snatch for his pet holt, he saw in a minute how he'd been imposed on, and how the other dog had him in the door, so to speak, and he 'peared surprised, and then he looked sorter discouraged like, and didn't try no more to win the fight, and so he got shucked out bad. He gave Smiley a look as much as to say his heart was broke, and it was his fault, for putting up a dog that hadn't no hind legs for him to take holt of, which was his main dependence in a fight, and then he limped off a piece, and laid down and died. It was a good pup, was that Andrew Jackson, and would have made a name for hisself if he'd lived, for the stuf was in him, and he had genius—I know it, because he hadn't had no opportunities to speak of, and it don't stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under them circumstances, if he hadn't no talent. It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his'on, and the way it turned out.

Well, thish-yer Smiley had rat-terriers and chicken cocks, and tom-cats, and all them kind of things, till you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you. He ketches a frog one day and took him home and said he cal'lated to educate him; and so he never done nothing for three months but set in his back yard and learn that frog

to jump. And you bet you he *did* learn him, too. He'd give him a little hunch behind, and the next minute you'd see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut—see him turn one summer-set, or maybe a couple, if he got a good start, and come down flat-footed and all right, like a cat. He got him up so in the matter of ketching flies, and kept him in practice so constant, that he'd nail a fly every time as far as he could see him. Smiley said all a frog wanted was education, and he could do most anything—and I believe him. Why, I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor—Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog—and sing out, "Flies! Dan'l, flies," and quicker'n you could wink, he'd spring straight up, and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor again as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd done any more'n any frog might do. You never see a frog so modest and straightfor'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted. And when it come to fair-and-square jumping on a dead level, he could get over more ground at one straddle than any animal of his breed you ever see. Jumping on a dead level was his strong suit, you understand, and when it come to that, Smiley would ante up money on him as long as he had a red. Smiley was monstrous proud of his frog, and well he might be, for fellers that had travelled and ben everywhere all said he laid over any frog that ever they see.

Well, Smiley kept the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him down town sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller—a stranger in the camp, he was—come across him with his box, and says:

"What might it be that you've got in the box?"

And Smiley says, sorter indifferent like, "It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't—it's only just a frog."

And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, "H'm—so 'tis. Well, what's *he* good for?"

"Well," Smiley says, easy and careless, "He's good enough for *one* thing I should judge—he can out-jump any frog in Calaveras county."

The feller took the box again, and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smiley and says, very deliberate, "Well—I don't see no points about that frog that's any better'n any other frog."

"Maybe you don't," Smiley says. "Maybe you understand frogs, and maybe you don't understand 'em, maybe you've had experience, and maybe you ain't only a amateur, as it were. Anyways, I've got *my* opinion, and I'll risk forty dollars that he can outjump any frog in Calaveras county."

And the feller studied a minute, and then says, kinder sad, like, "Well—I'm only a stranger here, and I ain't got no frog—but if I had a frog I'd bet you."

And then Smiley says, "That's all right—that's all right—if you'll hold my box a minute I'll go and get you a frog," and so the feller took the box, and put up his forty dollars along with Smiley's, and set down to wait.

So he set there a good while thinking and thinking to hisself, and then he got the frog out and prized his mouth open and took a teaspoon and

filled him full of quail-shot—filled him pretty near up to his chin—and set him on the floor. Smiley he went out to the swamp and slopped around in the mud for a long time, and finally he ketched a frog and fetched him in and give him to this feller and says:

"Now if you're ready, set him alongside of Dan'l, with his fore-paws just even with Dan'l's, and I'll give the word." Then he says, "one—two—three—jump!" and him and the feller touched up the frogs from behind, and the new frog hopped off lively, but Dan'l give a heave, and hysted up his shoulders—so—like a Frenchman, but it wasn't no use—he couldn't budge; he was planted as solid as a anvil, and he couldn't no more stir than if he was anchored out. Smiley was a good deal surprised, and he was disgusted too, but he didn't have no idea what the matter was, of course.

The feller took the money and started away, and when he was going out at the door he sorter jerked his thumb over his shoulder—this way—at Dan'l, and says again, very deliberate, "Well—I don't see no points about that frog that's any better'n any other frog."

Smiley he stood scratching his head and looking down at Dan'l a long time, and at last he says, "I do wonder what in the nation that frog throwed off for—I wonder if there ain't something the matter with him—he 'pears to look mighty baggy, somehow"—and he ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck, and lifted him up and says, "Why blame my cats if he don't weigh five pound"—and turned him upside down, and he belched out about a double-handful of shot. And then he see how it was, and he was the maddest man—he set the frog down and took out after that feller, but he never ketched him. And—

[Here Simon Wheeler heard his name called from the front-yard, and got up to go and see what was wanted.] And turning to me as he moved away, he said: "Just sit where you are, stranger, and rest easy—I ain't going to be gone a second."

But by your leave, I did not think that a continuation of the history of the enterprising vagabond Jim Smiley would be likely to afford me much information concerning the Rev. Leonidas W. Smiley, and so I started away.

At the door I met the sociable Wheeler returning, and he buttonholed me and recommenced:

"Well, thish-yer Smiley had a yaller one-eyed cow that didn't have no tail only just a short stump like a bannanner and——"

"O, curse Smiley and his afflicted cow!" I muttered, good-naturedly, and bidding the old gentleman good-day, I departed.

Yours, truly  
Mark Twain  
1865

SARAH MORGAN BRYAN PIATT  
1836–1919

As a native-born Kentuckian and daughter of slaveholders, Sarah Piatt brought to her poetry a political subjectivity that was formed in the borderland separating North from South. Highly intelligent and honest, she used her poetry to explore the principal social issues of her day—slavery, the Civil War, the myth of the Lost Cause, the displacement of southern blacks, bourgeois corruption in the North, social and economic inequities both here and abroad, changing gender and social values, and the questionable judgments of God. Driven by her personal knowledge of war's waste, Piatt was a political poet for whom issues of social justice (in heaven as well as on earth) were central.

For all the strength of her political commitments, however, Piatt's poetry is of greatest interest for the way that it subsists thematically and structurally in the in-between world of her borderland mentality—a mentality that, like the speaker's in her signature poem, "The Palace-Burner," is never at home in its own contradictions and never able to ignore its complexity in the evil it condemns. Too ironic and too tough-minded to be popular in her own day and yet too accomplished to be ignored, Piatt's poems are striking both for the range and complexity of their concerns and for their stylistic anticipations of modernism, particularly the use of fragmented speakers, rough rhythms, and dialogic structures. In an age given to admiring smoothness and musicality over originality, her voice was unique.

Born on her maternal grandmother's plantation outside Lexington, Kentucky, on August 11, 1836, Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt came from one of her state's most illustrious founding families, the Bryans, who had migrated west from North Carolina with Daniel Boone in the late 1700s. The Boones and Bryans intermarried over many generations, making the mythic frontiersman Sarah's kinsman through marriage several times over. In 1844 Piatt's mother, Mary Spiers Bryan, died, the first of many deaths that reverberate through her poetry, including those of three children lost in infancy or childhood. As was the custom in the South after a mother's death, Sarah and her younger siblings were sent to various relatives. Sarah and her sister Ellen returned to their grandmother's plantation, and Sarah later lived with her father's sister, Aunt "Annie" Boone of New Castle, Kentucky. While there, Sarah completed her formal education, graduating from Henry Female College in 1855 with a strong foundation in the sciences and humanities, especially British poetry.

While in New Castle, Sarah began submitting poems to the *Louisville Journal*, whose waspish editor, George D. Prentice, a well-known advocate of women poets, took her under his wing. Prentice introduced her to her future husband, John James Piatt, a young Ohioan, also from an extensive pioneering family. A year older than Sarah, J.J., as he called himself, was a journalist, litterateur, and poet-in-the-making. (In 1860, J.J. published his first volume of verse, *Poems of Two Friends*, coauthored with William Dean Howells.) On June 18, 1861, two months after Union troops surrendered Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor to

Confederate forces, J.J. and Sarah married, and the couple moved north to Washington, D.C., where J.J. had a clerkship in the Treasury Department, the first of many patronage positions he would hold—and lose.

Ephemeral as his jobs were (his only successful venture was an eleven-year stint as American consul in Ireland), obtaining them proved disproportionately costly, forcing J.J. to constantly beg for favors in ways that alienated him from virtually everyone that he asked for help, even his oldest friends, Howells and E. C. Stedman. By 1902, Howells reported to John Hay that J.J. was "quite pathetically poor." In the final years of their very long lives together, both he and Sarah depended on the generosity of others to survive. In 1914 J.J. was left incapacitated by a carriage accident. After his death in 1917, increasing ill health forced Sarah to leave the family homestead in North Bend, Ohio. She died at the home of her son, Cecil, in New Jersey in 1919.

In its entirety, Piatt's publishing spanned the years 1854 to 1911. She produced seventeen books, two of which she coauthored with her husband, and hundreds of her poems appeared in leading British, Irish, and American literary periodicals. Although the literary establishment of her day clearly recognized that she was the superior poet of the two spouses (for example, the *Atlantic Monthly* published thirty of her poems and only nine of J.J.'s), after their deaths, only J.J.'s name was preserved, probably because of his close ties to Howells, a master figure in the literature of the day. However, even J.J. recognized his wife's gifts and original talent. "Sallie is writing . . . some very good poems. . . . Nearly everything she writes has a sort of dramatic play in it," J.J. told Stedman in 1869, speaking of the striking evolution that occurred in Sarah's poetry after the war. Two years later, he clarified "Sallie's" new style: "I think you'll like the poems, they seem . . . new in measure and individual in . . . tone—not following . . . any school or favorite. Their subjects are often taken directly from some experience of life, or suggestion of experience."

Piatt's "new" poems were in fact a sharp departure from both the poetry she had written before the war and that written by most of the key literary figures of her day, especially in the centrality of dialogue to them. Lyric poets had never been shy about using dialogue as a rhetorical device, but its use was generally occasional, not constitutive. Not so with Piatt. For this self-divided poet, dialogue with its potential for clashing perspectives became the central building block of her verse. She used direct and indirect dialogue (or what J.J. refers to as "dramatic play") to root her poetry in "life," often taking her cue for a poem from something someone else said. In "The Palace-Burner," for instance, a child's question leads the speaker-mother into an internal dialogue about her own moral complicity in the revolutionary activities she condemns. Other voices that appear in her poems are those of husbands, lovers, friends, acquaintances, critics, wayside strangers, overheard speakers, and her most Job-like performance, false comforters.

In using dialogue in this way, Piatt stripped from her verse both the excesses of her antebellum newspaper poetry (which reflected her youthful immersion in the narcissistic conventions of antebellum romantic poetry, wherein the speaker's suffering was all) and also the more restrained but no less conventional idealism encouraged by the elite postbellum periodicals and by men like Stedman, editor and poet Richard Gilder, and abolitionist and liberal

author Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Instead, she made her poems a vehicle for the expression of a full range of complex emotions and perspectives. With tragic irony ("The Palace-Burner"), bitter intensity and even blasphemy, tightly controlled wit ("Hearing the Battle" and "The Funeral for a Doll"), and playfulness ("The Witch in the Glass," one of few poems that achieved widespread popularity in her lifetime), Piatt pushed hard at the limits of Victorian language and the Victorian female persona, staging in her language a multiply fractured persona that was divided not just between North and South but between love and anger, tiger and dove, romanticism and cynicism, piety and apostasy, submission and rebellion.

Without attempting to transcend her own time, Piatt opened her poetry to the divergent voices of her period and culture and to those constituting her own fractured and multiple "self." She was, one graduate student wrote in a response paper, not just a political but "a deeply ethical" writer. After nearly a hundred years of silence and changes in the way we approach literature and particularly poetry, she is receiving the reception her poetic achievements deserve.

*Paula Bennett Bennett*

Professor Emerita, Southern Illinois University–Carbondale

### Hearing the Battle—July 21, 1861.<sup>1</sup>

One day in the dreamy summer,  
On the Sabbath hills, from afar  
We heard the solemn echoes  
Of the first fierce words of war.

Ah, tell me, thou veiled Watcher  
Of the storm and the calm to come,  
How long by the sun or shadow  
Till these noises again are dumb.

And soon in a hush and glimmer  
We thought of the dark, strange fight,  
Whose close in a ghastly quiet  
Lay dim in the beautiful night.

Then we talk'd of coldness and pallor,  
And of things with blinded eyes  
That stared at the golden stillness  
Of the moon in those lighted skies;

And of souls, at morning wrestling  
In the dust with passion and moan,

<sup>1</sup>Mets at Washington (1864).

So far away at evening  
In the silence of worlds unknown.

But a delicate wind beside us  
Was rustling the dusky hours,  
As it gather'd the dew odors  
Of the snowy jessamine-flowers.

And I gave you a spray of the blossoms,  
And I said: "I shall never know  
How the hearts in the land are breaking,  
My dearest, unless you go."

### The Funeral of a Doll<sup>1</sup>

They used to call her Little Nell,  
In memory of that lovely child  
Whose story each had learned to tell.  
She, too, was slight and still and mild,  
Blue-eyed and sweet; she always smiled,  
And never troubled any one  
Until her pretty life was done.  
And so they tolled a tiny bell,  
That made a wailing fine and faint,  
As fairies ring, and all was well.  
Then she became a waxen saint.

Her funeral it was small and sad.  
Some birds sang bird-hymns in the air.  
The humming-bee seemed hardly glad,  
Spite of the honey everywhere.  
The very sunshine seemed to wear  
Some thought of death, caught in its gold,  
That made it waver wan and cold.

Then, with what broken voice he had,  
The Preacher slowly murmured on  
(With many warnings to the bad)  
The virtues of the Doll now gone.

A paper coffin rosily-lined  
Had Little Nell. There, drest in white,  
With buds about her, she reclined,

<sup>1</sup>Poems in Company with Children (1877).



A very fair and piteous sight—  
 Enough to make one sorry, quite.  
 And, when at last the lid was shut  
 Under white flowers, I fanced—but  
 No matter: When I heard the wind  
 Scatter spring-rain that night across  
 The Doll's wee grave, with tears half-blind  
 One child's heart felt a grievous loss.

30

"It was a funeral, mamma. Oh,  
 Poor little Nell is dead, is dead.  
 How dark!—and do you hear it blow?  
 She is afraid." And, as she said  
 These sobbing words, she laid her head  
 Between her hands and whispered: "Here  
 Her bed is made, the precious dear—  
 She cannot sleep in it, I know.  
 And there is no one left to wear  
 Her pretty clothes. *Where did she go?*  
 —See, this poor ribbon tied her hair!"

1877

### The Palace-Burner<sup>1</sup>

#### A Picture in a Newspaper

She has been burning palaces. "To see  
 The sparks look pretty in the wind?" Well, yes—  
 And something more. But women brave as she  
 Leave much for cowards, such as I, to guess.

But this is old, so old that everything  
 Is ashes here—the woman and the rest.  
 Two years are—oh! so long. Now you may bring  
 Some newer pictures. You like this one best?

5

You wish that you had lived in Paris then?—  
 You would have loved to burn a palace, too?  
 But they had guns in France, and Christian men  
 Shot wicked little Communists like you.

10

<sup>1</sup>A striking illustration of the execution of a  
*Perolise*—or "palace-burner," as the female  
 members of the Paris Commune were  
 called—appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, July 8,  
 1871. The principal speaker in the poem is a  
 bourgeois mother, who is talking with her  
 young son about this illustration.

You would have burned the palace?—Just because  
 You did not live in it yourself! Oh! why  
 Have I not taught you to respect the laws?  
 You would have burned the palace—would not I?

15

Would I? Go to your play. Would I, indeed?  
 I? Does the boy not know my soul to be  
 Languid and worldly, with a dainty need  
 For light and music? Yet he questions me.

20

Can he have seen my soul more near than I?  
 Ah! in the dusk and distance sweet she seems,  
 With lips to kiss away a baby's cry,  
 Hands fit for flowers, and eyes for tears and dreams.

25

Can he have seen my soul? And could she wear  
 Such utter life upon a dying face:  
 Such unappealing, beautiful despair:  
 Such garments—soon to be a shroud—with grace?

30

Has she a charm so calm that it could breathe  
 In damp, low places till some frightened hour;  
 Then start, like a fair, subtle snake, and wreath  
 A stinging poison with a shadowy power?

Would I burn palaces? The child has seen  
 In this fierce creature of the Commune here,  
 So bright with bitterness and so serene,  
 A being finer than my soul, I fear.

1872

### The Witch in the Glass<sup>1</sup>

"My mother says I must not pass  
 Too near that glass;  
 She is afraid that I will see  
 A little witch that looks like me,  
 With a red, red mouth, to whisper low  
 The very thing I should not know!"

5

Alack for all your mother's care!  
 A bird of the air,

<sup>1</sup>*The Union of American Poetry and Art* (1880),  
 text from *Scribner's Monthly* (1881).

A wistful wind, or (I suppose  
Sent by some hapless boy) a rose,  
With breath too sweet, will whisper low,  
The very thing you should not know!

10

1880

## WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

1837-1920

The most influential American novelist, editor, and critic of his generation, W. D. Howells was at the center of American literary culture for over fifty years. Born and raised in frontier Ohio, Howells was also one of the first important western writers to emigrate to the publishing centers of the East. Largely self-educated, he visited New England in July 1860 and met Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other luminaries. As he later reminisced, Hawthorne gave him a note to pass to Emerson: "I find this young man worthy." And while hosting Howells at dinner at the Parker House, James T. Fields said to James Russell Lowell, "this is something like the apostolic succession; this is the laying on of hands." Later in the same year, Howells published a campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln, and after Lincoln's election he was rewarded with an appointment as U.S. consul in Venice. There he wrote the essays collected in his first major book, *Venetian Life* (1866). Settling in Boston the same year, he became the assistant editor of the redoubtable *Atlantic Monthly*, the most important magazine in America, and upon the retirement of Fields in 1871, Howells became its editor, a position he held for the next ten years. In this office he became a dominant critical voice, an arbiter of taste and fashion, and a champion of literary realism or "the truthful treatment of material."

For Howells, realism was a democratic movement in the arts, a focus on the normal and commonplace, distinct from romanticism or "romanticistic" fiction with its emphasis on the more ideal, bizarre, sentimental, or aristocratic. In a word, he promoted such writers as Henry James and Mark Twain and criticized others such as Sir Walter Scott and William Makepeace Thackeray. He urged readers to apply this singular test to any work of the imagination: "Is it true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women?" He was profoundly moved in the late 1880s by Leo Tolstoy's ideas about nonviolence and economic equality. The Russian realist "has not influenced me in aesthetics only, but in ethics, too," he explained, "so that I can never again see life in the way I saw it before I knew him." Howells summarized his notion of moral complicity in his novel *The Minister's Charge* (1886). No one "shined or suffered to himself alone," a character remarks. "If a community was corrupt, if an age was immoral, it was not because of the vicious, but the

virtuous who fancied themselves indifferent spectators." Faithful to such principles in his life as well as in his art, Howells flirted with socialism and inveighed against imperialism, as in his story "Editha" (1905), a satire of a young woman who challenges her weak-willed lover to win glorious honors in battle.

Nowhere were Howells's democratic ethics more apparent than in his courageous but ill-fated defense of the Haymarket anarchists. On May 4, 1886, after a wave of labor strikes in Chicago in favor of an eight-hour workday, a policeman was killed, and seven others were mortally wounded by a bomb of unknown origin thrown during a rally in Haymarket Square organized by anarchists to protest police brutality. Eight anarchists were arrested, though none was identified as the bomb-thrower, and tried for murder. All were found guilty on August 20 and seven of them sentenced to hang. Howells fairly believed they had been railroaded. After the Supreme Court of Illinois denied their appeal on November 2, he resolved to take a stand on their behalf. On November 4 he sent a letter to the editor of the *New-York Tribune* in which he urged readers to petition the governor of Illinois to commute the anarchists' sentences. The letter appeared in the newspaper on November 6 under the banner "Clemency for the Anarchists/A Letter from W. D. Howells." Howells stood virtually alone on behalf of the doomed men and became the target of public scorn. Even his friends refused to help. As Lowell wrote him, "I thought those Chicago ruffians well hanged," though he "honored your [Howells's] courage in saying what you did about them." After one of the men committed suicide and the sentences of two others were commuted to life in prison, the other four anarchists were executed on August 11. The next day Howells wrote a second letter to the *Tribune* entitled "A Word for the Dead," though it was not published in the paper and probably was never sent. However, Howells expressed similar views in his portrayal of the German socialist Lindau in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), the novel many critics consider his best. In 1893 the new governor of Illinois pardoned the three surviving anarchists, vindicating Howells's position.

Theodore Dreiser once compared Howells to a sentry "on the watch tower, straining for a first glimpse of approaching genius." As an editor of the *Atlantic* for fifteen years and later as the contributor of the "Editor's Study" and "Editor's Easy Chair" series to *Harper's*, Howells befriended and promoted the careers of such writers as James, Twain, Bret Harte, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins (later Freeman), Frank Norris, Charles W. Chesnut, John W. De Forest, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Hamlin Garland, Edith Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Abraham Cahan, and Stephen Crane. Such selections from Howells's late critical writing as reviews of Wilkins's stories in 1891 and Chesnut's stories in 1900 and an introduction to Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896) illustrate his sponsorship of women writers and writers of color. (Howells also endorsed women's suffrage and was one of the founding members of the NAACP in 1909.)

Known late in life as "the Dean of American letters," Howells was the first president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and served in that office for thirteen years before his death. Though he became a favorite target of such iconoclasts as H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, for whom he seemed to epitomize Victorian gentility, he deserves better from his critics. Frank Norris dismissed realism as "the drama of a broken teacup," but as practiced by Howells it

both affirmed and subtly questioned bourgeois values. While he once asserted that the “smiling aspects of life” are the “more truly American,” Howells was neither snob nor prig but an influential literary theorist, a prolific author, and a courageous spokesman for unpopular, progressive, and occasionally radical causes.

Gary Scharnhorst  
University of New Mexico

### Editha

The air was thick with the war feeling,<sup>1</sup> like the electricity of a storm which has not yet burst. Editha sat looking out into the hot spring afternoon, with her lips parted, and panting with the intensity of the question whether she could let him go. She had decided that she could not let him stay, when she saw him at the end of the still leafless avenue, making slowly up toward the house, with his head down, and his figure relaxed. She ran impatiently out on the veranda, to the edge of the steps, and imperatively demanded greater haste of him with her will before she called aloud to him, “George!” He had quickened his pace in mystical response to her mystical urgency, before he could have heard her, now he looked up and answered, “Well?”

“Oh, how united we are!” she exulted, and then she swooped down the steps to him. “What is it?” she cried.

“It’s war,” he said, and he pulled her up to him, and kissed her. She kissed him back intensely, but irrelevantly, as to their passion, and uttered from deep in her throat, “How glorious!”

“It’s war,” he repeated, without consenting to her sense of it; and she did not know just what to think at first. She never knew what to think of him, that made his mystery, his charm. All through their courtship, which was contemporaneous with the growth of the war feeling, she had been puzzled by his want of seriousness about it. He seemed to despise it even more than he abhorred it. She could have understood his abhorring any sort of bloodshed; that would have been a survival of his old life when he thought he would be a minister, and before he changed and took up the law. But making light of a cause so high and noble seemed to show a want of earnestness at the core of his being. Not but that she felt herself able to cope with a congenial defect of that sort, and make his love for her save him from himself. Now perhaps the miracle was already wrought in him. In the presence of the tremendous fact that he announced, all triviality seemed to have gone out of him; she began to feel that. He sank down on the top step, and wiped his forehead with her handkerchief, while she poured out upon him her question of the origin and authenticity of his news.

<sup>1</sup>Howells apparently alludes to the then-recent Spanish-American War of 1898, which he opposed.

All the while, in her duplex emotioning, she was aware that now at the very beginning she must put a guard upon herself against urging him, by any word or act, to take the part that her whole soul willed him to take, for the completion of her ideal of him. He was very nearly perfect as he was, and he must be allowed to perfect himself. But he was peculiar, and he might very well be reasoned out of his peculiarity. Before her reasoning went her emotioning: her nature pulling upon his nature, her womanhood upon his manhood, without her knowing the means she was using to the end she was willing. She had always supposed that the man who won her would have done something to win her; she did not know what, but something. George Gearson had simply asked her for her love, on the way home from a concert, and she gave her love to him, without, as it were, thinking. But now, it flashed upon her, if he could do something worthy to *have* won her—be a hero, *her* hero—it would be even better than if he had done it before asking her; it would be grander. Besides, she had believed in the war from the beginning.

“But don’t you see, dearest,” she said, “that it wouldn’t have come to this, if it hadn’t been in the order of Providence? And I call any war glorious that is for the liberation of people who have been struggling for years against the cruelest oppression. Don’t you think so too?”

“I suppose so,” he returned, languidly. “But war! Is it glorious to break the peace of the world?”

“That ignoble peace! It was no peace at all, with that crime and shame at our very gates.” She was conscious of parroting the current phrases of the newspapers, but it was no time to pick and choose her words. She must sacrifice anything to the high ideal she had for him, and after a good deal of rapid argument she ended with the climax: “But now it doesn’t matter about the how or why. Since the war has come, all that is gone. There are no two sides, any more. There is nothing now but our country.”

He sat with his eyes closed and his head leant back against the veranda, and he said with a vague smile, as if musing aloud, “Our country—right or wrong.”

“Yes, right or wrong!” she returned fervidly. “I’ll go and get you some lemonade.” She rose rustling, and whisked away; when she came back with two tall glasses of clouded liquid, on a tray, and the ice clucking in them, he still sat as she left him, and she said as if there had been no interruption: “But there is no question of wrong in this case. I call it a sacred war. A war for liberty, and humanity, if ever there was one. And I know you will see it just as I do, yet.”

He took half the lemonade at a gulp, and he answered as he set the glass down: “I know you always have the highest ideal. When I differ from you, I ought to doubt myself.”

A generous sob rose in Editha’s throat for the humility of a man, so very nearly perfect, who was willing to put himself below her.

Besides, she felt, more subliminally, that he was never so near slipping through her fingers as when he took that meek way.

"You shall not say that! Only, for once I happen to be right." She seized his hand in her two hands, and poured her soul from her eyes into his.

"Don't you think so?" she entreated him.  
He released his hand and drank the rest of his lemonade, and she added, "Have mine, too," but he shook his head in answering, "I've no business to think so, unless I act so, too."

Her heart stopped a beat before it pulsed on with leaps that she felt in her neck. She had noticed that strange thing in men; they seemed to feel bound to do what they believed, and not think a thing was finished when they said it, as girls did. She knew what was in his mind, but she pretended not, and she said, "Oh, I am not sure," and then faltered.

He went on as if to himself without apparently heeding her, "There's only one way of proving one's faith in a thing like this."

She could not say that she understood, but she did understand.

He went on again. "If I believed—if I felt as you do about this war—Do you wish me to feel as you do?"

Now she was really not sure, so she said, "George, I don't know what you mean."

He seemed to muse away from her as before. "There is a sort of fascination in it. I suppose that at the bottom of his heart every man would like at times to have his courage tested; to see how he would act."

"How can you talk in that ghastly way!"

"It is rather morbid. Still, that's what it comes to, unless you're swept away by ambition, or driven by conviction. I haven't the conviction or the ambition, and the other thing is what it comes to with me. I ought to have been a preacher, after all; then I couldn't have asked it of myself, as I must, now I'm a lawyer. And you believe it's a holy war, Editha?" he suddenly addressed her. "Or, I know you do! But you wish me to believe so, too?"

She hardly knew whether he was mocking or not, in the ironical way he always had with her plainer mind. But the only thing was to be outspoken with him.

"George, I wish you to believe whatever you think is true, at any and every cost. If I've tried to talk you into anything, I take it all back."

"Oh, I know that, Editha. I know how sincere you are, and how—I wish I had your undoubting spirit! I'll think it over. I'd like to believe as you do. But I don't, now; I don't, indeed. It isn't this war alone; though this seems peculiarly wanton and needless; but it's every war—so stupid; it makes me sick. Why shouldn't this thing have been settled reasonably?"

"Because," she said, very throatily again, "God meant it to be war."

"You think it was God? Yes, I suppose that is what people will say."

"I don't know. Sometimes it seems as if God hadn't meant it?"

men's keeping to work it as they pleased."

"Now, George, that is blasphemy."

"Well, I won't blaspheme."

he said, and then he rose to go. "I'll try to believe in your pocket Providence,"

"Why don't you stay to dinner?" Dinner at Balcom's Works was at one o'clock.

"I'll come back to supper, if you'll let me. Perhaps I shall bring you a concert." "Well, you may come back, on that condition."

"All right. If I don't come, you'll understand."

He went away without kissing her, and she felt it a suspension of their engagement. It all interested her intensely; she was undergoing a tremendous experience, and she was being equal to it. While she stood looking after him, her mother came out through one of the long windows, on to the veranda, with a catlike softness and vagueness.

"Why didn't he stay to dinner?"

"Because—because—war has been declared," Editha pronounced, without turning.

Her mother said, "Oh, my!" and then said nothing more until she had sat down in one of the large Shaker chairs, and rocked herself for some time. Then she closed whatever tact passage of thought there had been in her mind with the spoken words, "Well, I hope he won't go."

"And I hope he will," the girl said, and confronted her mother with a stormy exaltation that would have frightened any creature less unimpressible than a cat.

Her mother rocked herself again for an interval of cogitation. What she arrived at in speech was, "Well, I guess you've done a wicked thing, Editha Balcom."

The girl said, as she passed indoors through the same window her mother had come out by, "I haven't done anything—yet."

In her room, she put together all her letters and gifts from Gearson, down to the withered petals of the first flower he had offered, with that timidity of his veiled in that irony of his. In the heart of the packet she enshrined her engagement ring which she had restored to the pretty box he had brought it her in. Then she sat down, if not calmly yet strongly, and wrote:

"George: I understood—when you left me. But I think we had better emphasize your meaning that if we cannot be one in everything we had better be one in nothing. So I am sending these things for your keeping till you have made up your mind.

"I shall always love you, and therefore I shall never marry any one else.

But the man I marry must love his country first of all, and be able to say to

me,

*"I could not love thee, dear, so much,*

*Loved I not honor more,"*<sup>2</sup>

*"There is no honor above America with me. In this great hour there is*

*no other honor.*

<sup>2</sup>Editha cites the final lines of "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars," by Richard Lovelace (1618-1658).

*Your heart will make my words clear to you. I had never expected to say so much, but it has come upon me that I must say the utmost.*

Editha."

She thought she had worded her letter well, worded it in a way that could not be bettered; all had been implied and nothing expressed. She had it ready to send with the packet she had tied with red, white, and blue ribbon, when it occurred to her that she was not just to him, that she was not giving him a fair chance. He had said he would go and think it over, and she was not waiting. She was pushing, threatening, compelling. That was not a woman's part. She must have him free, free, free. She could not accept for her country or herself a forced sacrifice.

In writing her letter she had satisfied the impulse from which it sprang; she could well afford to wait till he had thought it over. She put the packet and the letter by, and rested serene in the consciousness of having done what was laid upon her by her love itself to do, and yet used patience, mercy, justice.

She had her reward. Gearson did not come to tea, but she had given him till morning, when, late at night there came up from the village the sound of a fife and drum with a tumult of voices, in shouting, singing, and laughing. The noise drew nearer and nearer; it reached the street end of the avenue; there it silenced itself, and one voice, the voice she knew best, rose over the silence. It fell; the air was filled with cheers; the fife and drum struck up, with the shouting, singing, and laughing again, but now retreating, and a single figure came hurrying up the avenue.

She ran down to meet her lover and clung to him. He was very gay, and he put his arm round her with a boisterous laugh. "Well, you must call me Captain, now, or Cap, if you prefer, that's what the boys call me. Yes, we've had a meeting at the town hall, and everybody has volunteered; and they selected me for captain, and I'm going to the war, the big war, the glorious war, the holy war ordained by the pocket Providence that blesses butchery. Come along; let's tell the whole family about it. Call them from their downy beds, father, mother, Aunt Hitty, and all the folks!"

But when they mounted the veranda steps he did not wait for a larger audience; he poured the story out upon Editha alone.

"There was a lot of speaking, and then some of the fools set up a shout for me. It was all going one way, and I thought it would be a good joke to sprinkle a little cold water on them. But you can't do that with a crowd that adores you. The first thing I knew I was sprinkling hell-fire on them. 'Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war.'<sup>3</sup> That was the style. Now that it had come to the fight, there were no two parties; there was one country, and the thing was to fight the fight to a finish as quick as possible. I suggested volunteering then and there, and I wrote my name first of all on the roster. Then they elected me—that's all. I wish I had some ice-water!"

<sup>3</sup>George quotes Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, act 2, scene 1, line 273.

She left him walking up and down the veranda, while she ran for the ice-pitcher and a goblet, and when she came back he was still walking up and down, shouting the story he had told her to her father and mother, who had come out more sketchily dressed than they commonly were by day. He drank goblet after goblet of the ice-water without noticing who was giving it, and kept on talking, and laughing through his talk wildly. "It's astonishing," he said, "how well the worse reason looks when you try to make it appear the better. Why, I believe I was the first convert to the war in that crowd to-night! I never thought I should like to kill a man; but now, I shouldn't care; and the smokeless powder lets you see the man drop that you kill. It's all for the country! What a thing it is to have a country that *can't* be wrong, but if it is, is right anyway!"

Editha had a great, vital thought, an inspiration. She set down the ice-pitcher on the veranda floor, and ran up-stairs and got the letter she had written him. When at last he noisily bade her father and mother, "Well, good night. I forgot I woke you up; I sha'n't want any sleep myself," she followed him down the avenue to the gate. There, after the whirling words that seemed to fly away from her thoughts and refuse to serve them, she made a last effort to solemnize the moment that seemed so crazy, and pressed the letter she had written upon him.

"What's this?" he said, "Want me to mail it?"

"No, no. It's for you. I wrote it after you went this morning. Keep it—keep it—and read it sometime—" She thought, and then her inspiration came: "Read it if ever you doubt what you've done, or fear that I regret your having done it. Read it after you've started."

They strained each other in embraces that seemed as ineffective as their words, and he kissed her face with quick, hot breaths that were so unlike him, that made her feel as if she had lost her old lover and found a stranger in his place. The stranger said, "What a gorgeous flower you are, with your red hair, and your blue eyes that look black now, and your face with the color painted out by the white moonshine! Let me hold you under my chin, to see whether I love blood, you tiger-lily!" Then he laughed Gearson's laugh, and released her, scared and giddy. Within her willfulness she had been frightened by a sense of subtler force in him, and mystically mastered as she had never been before.

She ran all the way back to the house, and mounted the steps panting. Her mother and father were talking of the great affair. Her mother said: "Wa'n't Mr. Gearson in rather of an excited state of mind? Didn't you think he acted curious?"

"Well, not for a man who'd just been elected captain and had to set'em up for the whole of Company A," her father chuckled back.

"What in the world do you mean, Mr. Balcom? Oh! There's Editha!" She offered to follow the girl indoors.

"Don't come, mother!" Editha called, vanishing.

Mrs. Balcom remained to reproach her husband. "I don't see much of anything to laugh at."

"Well, it's catching. Caught it from Gearson. I guess it won't be much of a war, and I guess Gearson don't think so, either. The other fellows will be back down as soon as they see we mean it. I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. I'm going back to bed, myself."

Gearson came again next afternoon, looking pale, and rather sick, but quite himself, even to his languid irony. "I guess I'd better tell you, Editha, that I consecrated myself to your god of battles last night by pouring too many libations to him down my own throat. But I'm all right, now. One has to carry off the excitement, somehow."

"Promise me," she commanded, "that you'll never touch it again!"

"What! Not let the cannikin dink? Not let the soldier drink? Well, I promise."

"You don't belong to yourself now; you don't even belong to me. You belong to your country, and you have a sacred charge to keep yourself strong and well for your country's sake. I have been thinking, thinking all night and all day long."

"You look as if you had been crying a little, too," he said with his queer smile.

"That's all past. I've been thinking, and worshipping you. Don't you suppose I know all that you've been through, to come to this? I've followed you every step from your old theories and opinions."

"Well, you've had a long row to hoe."

"And I know you've done this from the highest motives—"

"Oh, there won't be much pettifoggery to do till this cruel war is—"

"And you haven't simply done it for my sake. I couldn't respect you if you had."

"Well, then well! say I haven't. A man that hasn't got his own respect intact wants the respect of all the other people he can corner. But we won't go into that. I'm in for the thing now, and we've got to face our future. My idea is that this isn't going to be a very protracted struggle; we shall just scare the enemy to death before it comes to a fight at all. But we must provide for contingencies, Editha. If anything happens to me—"

"Oh, George!" She clung to him sobbing.

"I don't want you to feel foolishly bound to my memory. I should hate that, wherever I happened to be."

"I am yours, for time and eternity—time and eternity." She liked the words; they satisfied her famine for phrases.

"Well, say eternity; that's all right, but time's another thing; and I'm talking about time. But there is something! My mother! If anything happens—day!" Then he sobered. "If anything happens, I want you to help my mother out. She won't like my doing this thing. She brought me up to think war a fool thing as well as a bad thing. My father was in the civil war; all through it, lost his arm in it." She thrilled with the sense of the arm round her; what if that should be lost? He laughed as if divining her: "Oh, it doesn't run in

the family, as far as a I know!" Then he added, gravely, "He came home with misgivings about war, and they grew on him. I guess he and mother agreed between them that I was to be brought up in his final mind about it; but that was before my time. I only knew him from my mother's report of him and his opinions; I don't know whether they were hers first; but they were hers last. This will be a blow to her. I shall have to write and tell her—"

He stopped, and she asked, "Would you like me to write too, George?"

"I don't believe that would do. No, I'll do the writing. She'll understand a little if I say that I thought the way to minimize it was to make war on the largest possible scale at once—that I felt I must have been helping on the war somehow if I hadn't helped keep it from coming, and I knew I hadn't; when it came, I had no right to stay out of it."

Whether his sophistries satisfied him or not, they satisfied her. She clung to his breast, and whispered, with closed eyes and quivering lips, "Yes, yes, yes!"

"But if anything should happen, you might go to her, and see what you could do for her. You know? It's rather far off; she can't leave her chair—"

"Oh, I'll go, if it's the ends of the earth! But nothing will happen! Nothing can! I—"

She felt herself lifted with his rising, and Gearson was saying, with his arm still round her, to her father: "Well, we're off at once, Mr. Balcorn. We're to be formally accepted at the capital, and then bunched up with the rest somehow, and sent into camp somewhere, and got to the front as soon as possible. We all want to be in the van, of course; we're the first company to report to the Governor. I came to tell Editha, but I hadn't got round to it."

She saw him again for a moment at the capital, in the station, just before the train started southward with his regiment. He looked well, in his uniform, and very soldierly, but somehow girlish, too, with his clean-shaven face and slim figure. The manly eyes and the strong voice satisfied her, and his preoccupation with some unexpected details of duty flattered her. Other girls were weeping and bemoaning themselves, but she felt a sort of noble distinction in the abstraction, the almost unconsciousness, with which they parted. Only at the last moment he said, "Don't forget my mother. It mayn't be such a walk-over as I supposed," and he laughed at the notion.

He waved his hand to her, as the train moved off—she knew it among a score of hands that were waved to other girls from the platform of the car, for it held a letter which she knew was hers. Then he went inside the car to read it, doubtless, and she did not see him again. But she felt safe for him through the strength of what she called her love. What she called her God, mutual understanding, would watch over him and keep him and bring him back to her. If with an empty sleeve, then he should have three arms instead of two, for both of hers should be his for life. She did not see, though, why she should always be thinking of the arm his father had lost.

There were not many letters from him, but they were such as she could have wished, and she put her whole strength into making hers such as she imagined he could have wished, glorifying and supporting him. She wrote to his mother glorifying him as their hero, but the brief answer she got was merely to the effect that Mrs. Gearson was not well enough to write herself and thanking her for her letter by the hand of some one who called herself "Yes truly, Mrs. W. J. Andrews."

Editha determined not to be hurt, but to write again quite as if the answer had been all she expected. But before it seemed as if she could have written, there came news of the first skirmish, and in the list of the killed which was telegraphed as a trifling loss on our side, was Gearson's name. There was a frantic time of trying to make out that it might be, must be, some other Gearson; but the name, and the company and the regiment, and the State were too definitely given.

Then there was a lapse into depths out of which it seemed as if she never could rise again; then a lift into clouds far above all grief, black clouds, that blotted out the sun, but where she soared with him, with George, that blotted out the fever that she expected of herself, but she did not die George! She had the fever that she expected of herself, but she did not die in it; she was not even delirious, and it did not last long. When she was well enough to leave her bed, her one thought was of George's mother, of his strangely worded wish that she should go to her and see what she could do for her. In the exaltation of the duty laid upon her—it buoyed her up instead of burdening her—she rapidly recovered.

Her father went with her on the long railroad journey from northern New York to western Iowa; he had business out at Davenport, and he said he could just as well go then as any other time; and he went with her to the little country town where George's mother lived in a little house on the edge of illimitable corn-fields, under trees pushed to a top of the rolling prairie. George's father had settled there after the civil war, as so many other old soldiers had done; but they were Eastern people, and Editha fancied touches of the East in the June rose overhanging the front door, and the garden with early summer flowers stretching from the gate of the paling fence.

It was very low inside the house, and so dim, with the closed blinds, that they could scarcely see one another: Editha tall and black in her crapes which filled the air with the smell of their dyes; her father standing decorously apart with his hat on his forearm, as at funerals; a woman rested in a deep armchair, and the woman who had let the strangers in stood behind the chair.

The seated woman turned her head round and up, and asked the woman behind her chair, "Who did you say?"

Editha, if she had done what she expected of herself, would have gone down on her knees at the feet of the seated figure and said, "I am George's Editha," for answer.

But instead of her own voice she heard that other woman's voice, saying, "Well, I don't know as I *did* get the name just right. I guess I'll have to

make a little more light in here," and she went and pushed two of the shutters ajar.

Then Editha's father said in his public will-now-address-a-few-remarks tone, "My name is Balcom, ma'am; Junius H. Balcom, of Balcom's Works, New York; my daughter—"

"Oh!" The seated woman broke in, with a powerful voice, the voice that always surprised Editha from Gearson's slender frame. "Let me see you! Stand round where the light can strike on your face," and Editha dumbly obeyed. "So, you're Editha Balcom," she sighed.

"Yes," Editha said, more like a culprit than a comforter.

"What did you come for?" Mrs. Gearson asked.

Editha's face quivered, and her knees shook "I came—because—because George—" She could go no farther.

"Yes," the mother said, "he told me he had asked you to come if he got killed. You didn't expect that, I suppose, when you sent him."

"I would rather have died myself than done it!" Editha said with more truth in her deep voice than she ordinarily found in it. "I tried to leave him free—"

"Yes, that letter of yours, that came back with his other things, left him free."

Editha saw now where George's irony came from.

"It was not to be read before—unless—until—I told him so," she faltered.

"Of course, he wouldn't read a letter of yours, under the circumstances, till he thought you wanted him to. Been sick?" the woman abruptly demanded.

"Very sick," Editha said, with self-pity.

"Daughter's life," her father interposed, "was almost despaired of, at one time."

Mrs. Gearson gave him no heed. "I suppose you would have been glad to die, such a brave person as you! I don't believe *he* was glad to die. He was always a timid boy, that way; he was afraid of a good many things; but if he was afraid he did what he made up his mind to. I suppose he made up his mind to go, but I knew what it cost him, by what it cost me when I heard of it. I had been through *one* war before. When you sent him you didn't expect he would get killed?"

The voice seemed to compassionate Editha, and it was time. "No," she huskily murmured.

"No, girls don't; women don't, when they give their men up to their country. They think they'll come marching back, somehow, just as gay as they went, or if it's an empty sleeve, or even an empty pantaloon, it's all the more glory, and they're so much the prouder of them, poor things."

The tears began to run down Editha's face; she had not wept till then; but it was now such a relief to be understood that the tears came.

"No, you didn't expect him to get killed," Mrs. Gearson repeated in a voice which was startlingly like Gearson's again. "You just expected him to kill some one else, some of those foreigners, that weren't there because they